

# Chapter Eight

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## Rocking & Rolling

Cat Stevens: *Miles From Nowhere* > *Lyrics*

“Piss stop!” blurted out Dave. After driving about ten tension-filled kilometers from the customs area, we needed a break. We pulled over, relieved our bladders, and released some of our pent-up anxieties. We had expected to encounter a trap of some sort after leaving the frontier. What exactly that would entail, we could only let our fertile imaginations run wild. Around every corner and over the crest of every hill could lay the trap. Military emplacement, roadblock across the highway, or air strike? Over only 100 grams (3.5 oz) of hash? Not likely.

And since there were few curves and fewer hills on this narrow two-lane highway with no shoulders, our view stretched far ahead, easing our stress a bit.

While standing on the side of the car in the middle of nowhere (we found ourselves there often on this part of the journey), with no humans nor beasts in sight, we made an executive decision. The chunk of hash smelled every bit as good as it did back in the Big Guy’s office. It had a soft and resinous texture with a medium-brown color. Exceptional stuff.

We brewed up a chillum and smoked it. As each of us took our turn on the chillum, the exhale of smoke included our tension. We hopped back in our car and fired up the trusty cassette deck, turning up the volume on Van Morrison's *Moondance* as we set off for Kandahar.

Checkpoint! We hadn't noticed that a small hill we drove over blocked our line of sight. When we crested the rise, there it loomed, straight in front on the left side—a lone soldier with an ancient rifle emerging from the guard shack. Our unexpected arrival caught him by surprise, just like us. The guard shack, located nearly on the road, sported a red and white striped wooden bar attached to a large metal lever handle. It barred both lanes.

With no time to consider alternatives, I instinctively reacted when I heard "Run it!" shouted simultaneously by Dave and Scott. I nailed the throttle and hit the bar, snapping it off with a loud *crack*. It took a moment to register with the soldier, and in the rearview mirror, I saw him raising the rifle to his shoulder. It was an old British Enfield, a .303 caliber bolt action rifle—a decent marksman with a maintained weapon should have been able to hit us. The guard and his gun were neither.

I didn't know if he got off a shot or not, and we weren't going back to check. We had struck the barrier with the windshield, at just the right angle to break the wood and deflect it over the top of the car. There wasn't any indication of damage to the car. Adrenaline was coursing through our bodies, and we were laughing and whooping down the road.

Our spur-of-the-moment decision to carry on was sound, fortunately. It wasn't a trap. There weren't anymore soldiers, and we had no further concerns about a setup. And best of all, we had a nice chunk of excellent hash for free—courtesy of the Afghan customs department. We silently expressed our solidarity at the origin of the hash, which was likely in an Afghan jail by now.

Our dietary regimen for the last few weeks wasn't stellar. In fact, it sucked. Subsisting on beer and brats in Germany, followed by meager "sandwiches" in the remaining European countries, it only got worse as we crossed into Asia. Apparently, there isn't much protein or vitamins in hash smoke.

We were low on reserves and running on fumes. Our normal resistance to stress was toast. But we were young and adventurous, and on a mission. We were close to our destination, Kabul, and nothing was going to get in our way. Call that naïvety, hubris, or three young guys full of piss and vinegar. That was our *modus operandi*.

We drove the rest of the way to Kandahar and felt like shit when we got there. Whatever we had picked up, it got all of us equally. We were fevered and dehydrated...and shitting with abandon. We got a hotel, and it was a miserable night. There were no Western-style medical facilities in Kandahar, and we were told that there was no pharmacy in the town. We lay in bed, stinking, fevered messes. We could drink water, but nothing else would stay down. Besides that, the food was inedible, and even if we were healthy, it wouldn't have stayed down either. We were close to, or already, delirious, and through exchanged groans agreed we had to get to a Western health facility or we could die. That would be in Kabul—500 km (311 mi) from where we lay desperately ill.

To say that the road to Kabul was through a lonely desert would be true, but lacking adequate description. There was virtually NOTHING resembling modern (1973) amenities until reaching Ghazni, a very long 350 km (217 mi) drive. No towns, no gas stations, no hotels, no restaurants—nothing. Petrol was had by chance at ramshackle roadside outposts. It would be a grueling and possibly dangerous drive—even in good health.

While suffering in the filthy accommodations of Kandahar, I had a momentary lapse in sickness, or was deeper into deliriousness than I realized: I announced I could drive. We dragged ourselves out of the hotel and into the car, which was now a virtual ambulance, and off we went on the only road between Kandahar and Kabul.

When I was a Boy Scout, I went to the National Jamboree when I was 12 years old. I boarded a train with a group, so I wasn't alone, but I didn't know anyone else. The train deposited us in Valley Forge, and shortly after that I found myself in a US army field hospital with pneumonia. I was delirious with fever, and I remember very little. I recall walking into the nearby tent where the doctors were bivouacked. It was later revealed that despite being only 12 years old, I had a remarkably sensible conversation with a doctor. I thought I was normal, but in fact I had a very high fever.

In Kandahar, I fell back on that episode.

It was a weird experience driving; the desert conjured up images and thoughts that were almost like tripping on LSD. A couple of hours into the drive, I saw a flash of something, or someone, dash in front of the car. I wasn't driving fast. Staying on the road was difficult, yet I had a vivid image of a person I would collide with if I didn't take evasive action. I swerved to the left, and we hit a ditch. The car pitched into the roadside ravine, then launched itself skyward, rolling like a whale and doing a belly flop, finally landing on its side.

Seat belts were nonexistent, so we rattled around inside the car, as did our belongings. We created a mini desert dust storm, scattering a debris field that stretched out about 20 m (66 ft) in diameter from the overturned car. The extent of our illness may have saved our lives, as it is with drunks in a situation like this. We rolled with the punches and survived with only bruising.

But our stuff was scattered everywhere and we were in a daze, although we all quickly scrambled out of the car. A crowd (out of nowhere) formed, and the vibe was threatening and foreboding. A woman held a child in her arms, wrapped in a filthy blanket. She was rocking it back and forth, and I think she was crying. There was a lot of movement and hostile stares in our direction.

Assorted parts of the car were strewn about in all directions. The windshield had popped out when the roof buckled. At least one tire was flat, and the accident damaged every surface of the car that came into contact with the hard-packed desert sand.

There we stood, having the delirium literally knocked out of us, not knowing what exactly had happened, and now quite aware that we were under threat from an angry crowd.

Then a Dot drove up in a Mercedes sedan. It was clearly a well-off merchant with two of his servants in the car. He stepped out of the car and, inexplicably, I vividly recall his attire. He wore a karakul hat typically seen on wealthier Afghans from the city. Islam and local tribal custom mandated that men have a beard—mostly they were unkempt, but this gentleman's was neatly trimmed and groomed. The brown tweed sport coat was over a wool, loose knit sweater with red accents woven into the chest area. His trousers were Western cut in a style matching his other garments, with leather lace-up dress shoes that were polished.

They descended on the scene, rapidly evaluated the situation, and the man began issuing orders to his servants. He hastened to the woman holding the child and engaged the menfolk in a one-sided conversation. We noticed the reaction from the locals to this intruder, to his body language and gestures. The desert people clearly respected him as an authority figure. Or perhaps, a lucrative source for negotiation.

The two servants were a flurry of activity. They rolled the car upright, gathered up our belongings, bent out the bashed in body of the car to clear the tires, used the spare tire and did something to the remaining flat tire to make the automobile “drivable.”

We were stunned, but came out of it and helped gather up what we could salvage. Our precious cassette player, speakers, and cassettes were unscathed. And so too was the chillum and hash on the person of Dave.

The merchant’s generosity continued. He gave us a large water bag—a lifesaving gesture in the desert, and we eagerly quenched our thirst on the spot. While we were overwhelmed with all that was happening, we remained alert to the rapidly changing vibe of the situation.

In short order, the car was back on four inflated tires with the roof pushed back up so it would hold the windshield in place. Our stuff was back on board, and the car engine running. A miraculous effort by those two manservants.

I saw the Afghan DOT—angel, savior, and heaven-sent messenger—passing out afghanis in handfuls to the desert people. He paid special attention to the crying woman holding the unmoving child in her arms. With that, he turned to us, waved us into the car and, looking into the wreck that we were about to depart in, said, “You must leave immediately. You are in grave danger.”

His body language, the enraged crowd, and the alleged wounded infant were overwhelmingly convincing. To top it off, we strange and very foreign travelers who had intruded into the peacefulness of their desert meant no further consideration was needed.

In a cloud of dust and sand, we were back on the road. We’d had enough of rolling and were not in the mood to rock.

After several hours of driving, we stopped at the first suitable hotel in Ghazni. We had consumed most of the water the good Samaritan gave us,

and we felt better. Rehydration eased our woes, but we were precariously close to the edge of disaster—not just the car wreck, but also the effects of dysentery and the dehydration we had suffered.

We gathered our strength for a couple of days, not wandering far from the hotel. We hesitantly ate nan, melons, and whatever fruit we could muster, washing it down with chai. That and our youth was enough to rejuvenate us and get our traveling shoes back on.

The car was a sight to behold. It attracted a crowd of gawkers, but no one would touch it. We had few remaining possessions, but our music and our hash were still with us. Traveling lighter was good—we needed little anyway. Belongings left inside the car were visible and easily taken, yet nothing was stolen.

We departed Ghazni in our moving disaster area of a car, dubbed the *Flying Wreck*. It was like riding on a motorcycle—we were open to the world with wind in our hair. Off we drove, with Kabul as the next stop.